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AUTHOR Glimps, Blanche Jackson
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ABSTRACT

The paper examines the characteristics of black rural families and explores strategies for promoting the parent-school relationship in the education of black rural handicapped children. The importance of families as resources for handicapped children is stressed, although the lack of attention to family and cultural affiliation is seen to reduce the effectiveness of early intervention. Among characteristics noted of black rural families are readily identifiable family structure, a well established relationship between siblings, and a general sense of optimism about the child's future. The paper stresses the need for educators to familiarize themselves with their students' cultural orientation. Strategies for encouraging parent participation in school are suggested, including flexibility in scheduling, alternative meeting formats, and use of black parents in leadership roles within the school. (CL)

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THE CHALLENGES IN EFFECTIVELY INVOLVING RURAL BLACK PARENTS OF HANDICAPPED CHILDREN

BY

Blanche Jackson Glimps, Ph.D.
Educational Consultant Services
19481 Steel Street
Detroit, Michigan 48235

EC 180965

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Migratory patterns of contemporary black families reveals a decrease in outmigration from the southern areas to northern urban areas (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1980). Blue collar black families are increasingly moving into traditionally white suburban and rural school districts. In fact, 25% of the black population of the United States are now residents of nonmetropolitan regions (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1980). Further, 1%, or 225,000 rural black families, live on farms (Plaski and Williams, 1983). Yet, there has been a dearth of analysis focusing on contemporary black educational concerns in rural America (Lee, 1985). However, in order to understand the challenges involved in educating black handicapped youths in rural areas, the important dynamics in the interaction between them and their learning environment must be examined.

Rural black parents of handicapped children are concerned about the quality of the educational experiences in which their children are involved. These parents desire experiences which will effectively and satisfyingly assist their children in participating in society. Unfortunately ignorance of, and disrespect for, black history and rural culture results in low expectations and unhealthy educator assessments of black children, their potential, their personalities, and their families (National Alliance of Black School Educators, 1984).

THE ROLE OF FAMILIES

Families are important resources for handicapped children especially in rural areas where a wide range of support services may be unavailable. Consequently, it is critical to include

families as appropriate resources in developing and implementing strategies for meeting the learning needs of children. The importance of parental involvement in all aspects of the educational planning and placement process has been confirmed and reconfirmed. Yet, excellent intervention plans may lose their effectiveness because individual family cultural patterns are disregarded. The family and its cultural affiliation are important factors exerting significant influence on how children learn and acquire social values.

The process by which children learn their cultural roles and responsibilities is described as enculturation (Soldier, 1985). The middle point in the enculturation process is the teaching style of the family. The final stage in the sequence is the learning styles of children (Castaneda, 1976). The importance of the culture and the role of the family in facilitating learning is strongly emphasized. As long as there are no interferences with this process, and parents are effectively involved in school experiences, children are able to learn and achieve to their optimal capacity. When home and school continue the enculturation process as partners, children are secure in knowing how to act and what to expect.

When the family is viewed as a system incorporating structure, life cycle, function and style, the role of cultural affiliation is pervasive. The cultural orientation of the family influences the family's division of labor, coping mechanism, marriage, family communication, cohesion, etc. Culture group membership affects

possible support sources available to the family (i.e., extended family, friends, church, neighbors, etc.); socialization and recreational opportunities in which families participate; as well as defines factors affecting the parents' functioning with their children (i.e., roles, discipline, etc.).

CHARACTERISTICS OF BLACK RURAL FAMILIES

Black families in rural communities usually exhibit strong sense of cooperation, self-help, unity and supportiveness. There is a readily identifiable family structure. Often several generations of the same family live in close proximity within the community, lending a sense of cohesiveness and support to the nuclear family. Black rural families are characterized by the importance placed on extended family members as significant others. Grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins, older siblings, etc. are often actively involved in the parenting process. With supportive assistance of this nature, such families are usually more capable of coping with problems of daily living and less likely to seek community or other outside help.

Within the family, there is a well established relationship between siblings. Generally, siblings are ready companions for recreational activities. During the temporary absence of parents, older siblings may often assume responsibility for the care of younger siblings. Black parents stress to their children the value of respecting other people---particularly elders, honesty, and strong religious faith. Further, black parents offer their children an extremely high degree of educational encouragement.

These parents want their children to be prepared for the future in order to have a better life than they experienced (Lee, 1985).

Many black families of handicapped children in rural areas are often monetarily poor, with little or no disposable income. However, some families have land-based resources available to assist them in providing for their basic needs. Nevertheless, such economically limited families may have more immediate subsistence concerns that take priority over educational concerns. Yet, such parents should not be viewed by educators as unconcerned about the education of their handicapped children. In spite of their financial limitations, black rural parents usually are optimistic for their children's future.

ROLE OF SCHOOLS

Other than the family, schools are a most important factor in giving children a cultural awareness which can result in positive human development and healthy intergroup relations. Positive home--school relations are crucial in providing consistent, meaningful services to black handicapped children in rural areas. In order to enhance such relationships, educational efforts must then encourage parental involvement, encourage children to enjoy satisfying relations in more than one cultural world, and encourage children to identify with aspects of each of these cultures.

Educators need to continuously assess their own strategies in nurturing the self esteem and other learning characteristics of black handicapped children. Importantly, ethnocentric teacher behavior exerts a negative effect on teaching and learning.

Ethnocentrism is reflected in a belief in the superiority of one cultural group and a feeling of contempt for other groups and cultures (Foster, 1982). Teachers with such perceptions can seriously interfere with productive learning in the classroom and in the community.

Educators must use culture as a building block for learning without the need to supplant or suppress children's native cultural forms (Hillard, 1980). Providing appropriate special education services to rural black handicapped children and their families may require different approaches. Teachers must be students of human behavior, social events and their causes, and characteristics of the citizens they serve. They must create teaching guidelines and structure teaching behaviors to be in harmony with local values and goals (Mahan, 1985). Meeting the culturally specific needs of handicapped children is an exciting and creative challenge.

It is imperative that educators become familiar with the cultural orientation represented by the children and families served by their programs. If our special education planning and placement process does not seriously take into account the rich background of the people of the communities, it fails its students. It fails black children by not recognizing the heritage and expectations that have shaped and continue to influence these children. It fails children from a traditional background by not providing experiences that will encourage future interpersonal growth, harmony and understanding. It fails its families by not actively working to effectively utilize the vast human resources and learning

supports available through the involvement of black parents.

Education must then be for the purpose of the actualization of potential and self-realization by the expansion of the human capability for the best interest of each person concerned so that a more meaningful life can be lead. Educational approaches must then embrace the fact that people are different. Learning opportunities must enhance self-concept and cultural identity. Incorporating and recognizing the individual's cultural heritage best facilitates the learning process and conveys a sense of positive self awareness to children.

DELINEATION OF STRATEGIES

A most important resource to educators, in achieving this objective, are black children's parents and families. Thus it is important that competencies for relating to black parents, as well as black students, be developed. These parents need to feel respected and valued for the contributions they can make to their children's education. Educators must encourage their contribution, listen to their ideas---as well as their criticisms, and respect their insight and experience.

Educators should try to make it as easy as possible for such parents to participate in the classroom and in educational planning meetings. This may necessitate providing child care, transportation, refreshments, and/or scheduling evening meetings for the convenience of working families. In addition, educators should be willing to talk with who ever comes on behalf of specific children---whether it be an aunt, uncle, grandparent, older sibling, parental boy/girl

friend, etc. In fact, parents should be encouraged to bring other family members to school conferences especially if these are people who have continuing relationships and influences on children.

Alternative meeting formats may need to be explored in order to facilitate the active involvement of parents. Examples of these include pot luck suppers, picnics, barbecues, fix-it-workshops, giving away of free items (i.e., instructional materials, toys, clothing, etc.), etc. Site possibilities for meetings may not only include school facilities, but also churches, community centers, parks, private homes, farms, etc. In communicating with parents, educators should remember that personal contact is much more effective than notes or phone calls. However, when written communications are used, these should be in a language and/or terminology understandable by families. Above all, educators should not get discouraged with parents for missing appointments, failing to show up at meetings, not following through on intervention strategies, etc. These factors should not be interpreted as parental lack of concern for their children. The interest, patience and enthusiasm which is displayed by educators towards black, and other culturally different parents, may assist these parents in really believing that their involvement and assistance is needed.

Black parents can be used in a leadership role within the school. In such a capacity these parents can serve as crucial liasons between their cultural community and the school. Such parents can assume responsibilities for contacting other parents; locating community people to serve as resources to the school;

volunteering within the school and/or classroom; or in numerous other capacities. When parents are interested, committed, and enthusiastic towards their children's educational experiences and their involvement with the school, they can make more effective contacts and reminders to other parents than can school personnel.

Holidays, festivities, community and cultural specific observances offer unusual opportunities for the involvement of black parents in school activities related to these events. By planning activities and special events related to the commemorations of black children, educators can convey the feeling that such observances are important and worthy of recognition. Parents can also be available within the school as speakers on specific topics, tutors, performers, sharers of materials, and participants in field trips. Parents of black rural children are important resources to use in implementing goals and objectives of individualized education programs established for handicapped children.

Additional suggestions for involving parents follow:

1. Plan school activities where parents become a central part. As an example, a school picnic, pot luck supper, etc. can be planned in which black parents and their families can highlight aspects of their culture through song, dance, music, crafts, foods, etc.
2. Conduct an oral survey or needs assessment of parents in order to determine topics of particular interests for parent group meetings. Parents are more likely to become involved in school functions when programs and activities

are specifically geared to address their stated need.

3. Respect the verbal and nonverbal patterns of interaction utilized by rural black parents and their families. Learn to listen and to respond appropriately to such communication patterns.
4. Allow children to be the focal point of parent meetings. Children can participate in plays, musicals, puppet shows, dance demonstrations, dramatizations, etc. The likeihood of parents attending a meeting is increased when their children are being highlighted.
5. Focus on children's assets, stating specific procedures for remediating deficiencies when conferencing with parents. Share with parents curricular goals, objectives, timelines, and methods of evaluation (Henderson, 1984). Provide appropriate strategies and suggestions for parents to utilize as follow-up procedures in the home.

CONCLUSIONS

Black children are from strong, supportive and caring families. Educators must recognize the strength of these families and become aware of the need for parental support for children's learning goals and objectives. While important for all programs, parent involvement is especially critical in programs serving culturally different children. Parents of black children bring different values and perspectives to programs. Opportunities should be available to utilize their involvement not only to individualize intervention to children's family background, but also to facilitate communication between home and school.

Educators must become aware of cultural mores that may influence children, and know what is acceptable behavior in that culture. This can be achieved through background investigation and study of rural black children's culture.

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